

# Historical relevance of Vygotsky's work: Its significance for a new approach to the problem of subjectivity in psychology

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses theoretical issues concerning Vygotsky's work that have remained unaddressed in the dominant interpretations of his work, either in the former Soviet psychology or in the dominant Western interpretations. This paper builds on interpretations of Vygotsky's concepts oriented by the unity of emotional and cognitive processes and focused on the search for new psychical unities on which to build a systemic representation of the human mind. Because Vygotsky did not provide a definite position on such questions, I have centered on the analysis of the consequences of his legacy for the development of a definition of subjectivity from a cultural-historical standpoint.

**Keywords:** Sense, "perezhivanie", reflection, internalization, subjectivity

## **Introduction**

Vygotsky's theory has spread into Western psychology, particularly through American translations and interpretations of his works. In North American scholarship, however, two blind spots exist regarding Vygotsky's legacy: the link between Vygotsky and Soviet psychology and the recognition of the first and last moments of Vygotsky's work. Those gaps in the American interpretation have caused Vygotsky's ideas concerning the representation of the psyche as a system and the unity of affective and cognitive processes to be overlooked – both were emphasized by the author, especially in the first and last moments of his work (González Rey, 2008).

Regarding the separation of Vygotsky from the development of Soviet psychology at that time (González Rey, 2001, 2002), I consider that (1)

the different theoretical backgrounds of Vygotsky's translators in Western psychology and (2) their resulting difficulty in understanding the systemic character of Vygotsky's work could account for this problem. That misunderstanding concerning the systemic character of Vygotsky's work explicitly expressed in the non-consideration of some of Vygotsky's more integrative concepts, like personality, the social situation of development, and sense. However, history always implies different interpretations, which are largely dependent on the interpreters' own positions as well as the context from which such interpretations are produced.

With regard to the second blind spot, Vygotsky's emphasis on emotions and his effort to develop a new psychical unity able to integrate cognitive and affective processes have been ignored. Their absence from Western Vygotskian interpretations is odd, but more peculiar is their absence from Soviet psychology itself, where the relevance that he placed on emotions and the complex emotional system as the driving forces of human development were ignored until the 1990s (Davydov, 1996; Leontiev, 1992, 2001). The consequences of ignoring those concepts for contemporary psychology remain, in my view, underestimated.

In this paper, I intend to focus on the first and last moments of Vygotsky's work and, in particular, on his ideas concerning the relevance of emotions and the unity of emotional and cognitive processes as generative psychical forces, which in Vygotsky's opinion were as real as any other phenomenon defined by its concrete character. With regard to his last moment, I center on the concept of sense and social situation of development in order to present a different alternative in the interpretation of his legacy: a cultural-historical theory of subjectivity. I am aware of the difficulties of this task given the prejudice against this concept, which has been labeled by many authors from different theoretical positions as a leftover of the modern

philosophical tradition based on the idea of the rationalistic subject.

However, concepts cannot be viewed as frozen entities. Their meanings are not fixed in any significant way. The relevance taken by the topics of the language, the culture and the symbolical productions in the first half of XX century created new conditions for the development of the topic of subjectivity on new basis.

## **The evolution of Vygotsky's thought**

Within Soviet psychology, Vygotsky was oriented, practically from the very beginning of his work, toward developing a new approach to psychology on the basis of Marxism, a philosophical position that was to become a fundamental source for Russian scientists after the October Revolution. Even though for Vygotsky only an objective psychology could follow Marxist principles, he attributed great significance to the subjective side of psychical phenomena, particularly in the first and last moments of his work. The tension between subjective and objective comprehensions of the human mind is apparent throughout Vygotsky's work.

Vygotsky's different moments, rather than temporally ordered stages, could be considered as different blending of ideas from his written works in different times. Notwithstanding his important reflections related to emotions, personality, fantasy and the generative capacity of the mind in some of his first works, in the same period it was also possible to find ideas addressed in a completely different direction.

In "Psychology of Art" and in his first publications related to defectology, Vygotsky seemed to be centered on a more systemic comprehension of human mental functioning. Nevertheless, from those very first works, it is possible to identify the tension between the objective and subjective emphases in his comprehension of the psyche. When I refer to the

subjective aspect of the psyche in his work, I am considering his emphasis on the generative character of the emotions because Vygotsky, at that moment, did not have a clear consciousness of the ontological specificity of subjective processes. A very characteristic expression of that emphasis on the subjective side of psychical phenomena in the first period of his work appeared in "Psychology of Art":

This way, all our fantastic and non real "*perezhivaniya*", in essence occur on an emotional basis completely real. So, we see that feeling and fantasy do not represent two separate processes, but essentially one and the same process. We correctly observe fantasy as a central expression of an emotional reaction (Vygotsky, 1965, p. 272).

This approach to the human mind, which underlines its generative function as closely linked to emotional processes, is particularly distinctive of the book in which it appears. Those emotionally real occurrences defined a new kind of reality, an emotional one, different from other "realities" based on different attributes of intelligibility as knowledge productions. The idea that fantasy is a central expression of the emotional reaction in fact led to the recognition of those processes as part of the human reality, a part that up to now has almost always been replaced by cognitive functions and actions in sociocultural psychology (Werstch, 1998; Bronckart, 2008; Rogoff, 1998, 2002). The ontological issue raised by the specific nature of the human psyche was not openly discussed in Soviet psychology until the middle of the seventies. Vygotsky also avoided that discussion. Elaborating at length on the role of emotions, Vygotsky stated in the same book:

Pathological cases of phobia, obsessive fears, etc., directly link to certain representations that almost invariably are absolutely false and distort reality, thus finding their spiritual expressions. So, a sick person who suffered obsessive fear is, in essence, sick by the sentiment. They suffer a fear without

any objective cause, which is enough to suggest to them, in their fantasy, that everyone is persecuting them (Vygotsky, 1965, p. 271).

Once again, the author defined emotions as responsible for human states "without any objective cause". In doing so, he recognized the generative character of emotions for human behavior. Vygotsky's orientation toward art indicated from the very beginning of his work not only his interest in art but his attraction to the complex affective processes involved in human artistic expression. Based on artistic creation, Vygotsky proposed a new project for the development of psychology as a whole, centered on a representation of the psyche focused on the relevance of emotions and their related processes, particularly fantasy and imagination, which were central in "Psychology of Art". Vygotsky's strong inclination to consider the subjective side of the psyche was also evident in his first works on defectology, which were also written before 1927. In "Defect and Compensation", one of his more relevant works written in 1924 and published after he made some corrections in 1925, he pointed out:

"Psychologists who worked with blind people at that time thought that the development of the blind centers on their blindness. The psychology of blindness is essentially the psychology of victory over blindness" (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 57).

The psychology of blindness, for him, did not result from the objective state of blindness; on the contrary, it represented a way to overcome the restraints of the blindness. What is implicit in Vygotsky's statement concerning blindness is that real shared and universal objective conditions do not become psychological drives for their objective consequences, they become psychological drives as result of the psychological alternatives created by blind people in dealing with those consequences. These psychical alternatives should be identified as subjective

because they resulted from the functioning of the mind as a whole. The difference between subjectivity and other forms of objectivity is an ontological difference.

Although Vygotsky was centered on the socio-cultural genesis of the psyche throughout his work, it was never clear in the course of his work how those complex human psychological expressions organize themselves on a social basis. It was in "Psychology of Art" where he more audaciously approached the social genesis of the human psyche:

Therefore, the non-Marxist social psychology understands social phenomena as crudely empirical...as collective, as relations with other persons. Society this way is understood as an aggregate of persons, as a complementary condition of the person's activity. These psychologists do not admit that in a more intimate setting, in the personal movement of ideas, of feelings, etc., the individual psyche is completely social and socially conditioned (Vygotsky, 1965, p. 20).

The social genesis of the human mind was clear from Vygotsky's initial work, but in his works between 1928 and 1931 social was replaced by external immediate relations and operations which becoming internal through internalization. His attempt to make explicit the social-cultural character of the psyche took on another meaning in that second moment of his work. In that moment, instead of centering on the social character of the psyche, Vygotsky focused on its objective character based on the concept of internalization. The notion of internalization was associated with an instrumental- operational representation of the relations between humans and the world. Activity theory, typically defined as the continuation of Vygotsky's legacy, can be associated with this part of his work. Under the activity theory, domain-based object activity became the central concept of psychology. Many Soviet psychologists and philosophers have

criticized this view of activity theory (Lomov, 1979; Mikjailov, 2006; Radzikhovskii, 1988; Orlov, 1990; and others).

Early in his career, Vygotsky used categories like personality and motivation in his search for complex psychical unities that could be used as the driving force of human behavior. Those categories also addressed a systemic comprehension of the psyche. However, this effort was overlooked by the dominant Western interpretations of his works. As Chaiklin pointed out concerning personality within the cultural-historical research: "How can a concept be so important yet receive relatively little attention in current research?" (Chaiklin, 2001, p. 238).

An interest in the topic of personality was recurrent throughout Vygotsky's work; in the first moment of his work, it was addressed in his definition of the individual psyche as a system. Vygotsky never made empirical inquiries oriented toward personality. This concept took different meanings throughout his work due to the various principles that dominated its different moments.

The intention to take personality as an integrative concept, as a new synthesis of other psychological facts instead of an aggregate of elements, was clear in Vygotsky's next statement:

Only vigorous departure from the methodological boundaries of traditional child psychology could lead us to study the development of the psychological higher synthesis that, with all fundament, could be defined as the child personality (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 45).

Personality represented his interest in mental functioning as a whole. Through this concept in the first period, Vygotsky signaled a new ontological definition of the psyche oriented toward a new psychical synthesis irreducible to functions. There has been a strong tendency to reify the second moment of Vygotsky's work, emphasizing semiotic mediation, signs, tools and internalization as the mature accomplishments of his work, ignoring the involvement of those

processes and tools in the functioning of the psychical system as a whole.

Some of the strongest Russian semioticians and philosophers who were contemporaries of Vygotsky, such as Bakhtin and Shpet, never separated signs from the complex subjective characteristics of the individual, nor from the social contexts within which action takes place. As Shpet stated: "...a unique material sign, word, embodies and condenses the unit of cultural sense and subjective contents" (Shpet, 1996, p. 245).

However, Vygotsky's emphasis in that second moment of his work on semiotic mediation as an essential characteristic of the higher psychological functions departed from psychical system functioning. Thereby, topics like emotions, fantasy, personality and imagination in fact disappeared from his analysis of the functions. That moment can be chronologically situated between 1928 and 1931.

Regarding personality in that second moment, he stated:

It should be said, therefore, that we turned into ourselves through others; this rule does not only refer to personality as a whole, but to the history of each isolating function. In that fact takes root the essence of the cultural problem of development taken in a purely logical form. Personality is in itself what it is, based on what it means for others (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 149).

Personality is formed on the basis of what it means for others. Starting from this assumption, Vygotsky understood the genesis of personality mechanically as a result of the external influences of others' opinions. This theory of the genesis of personality disregards the collateral effects of social experiences on personality, turning its genesis into a process defined from the outside. Personality appeared as an effect of external causes.

That second moment of his career can be thought of as an "objectivistic turning point" (González Rey, 2007, 2008). Psychical functions

were understood as an internalization of prior external processes and operations. Vygotsky was nearer than ever to Piaget in that period:

The sign, in the beginning, is always a way of social relationship, a way of influence over others, and only after fulfilling this function it becomes a way of influencing myself.... The reflection, said Piaget, could be taken as an internal debate. It should be mentioned, besides this, that the language is in the beginning a way of communication with others, and only later as an internal language it becomes a way of thinking (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 146-147).

At that time,<sup>1</sup> he remarked on the importance of operations in psychological development and understood the unity between external operations and psychical phenomena through the concept of internalization. Like Marx, who attributed a decisive role to tools in labor activities, Vygotsky gave a central role to tools in his understanding of mediation in human psychical activities. Practical tools used in concrete activities have the same functions as signs, which represent the tools of the psychological functions. The most important tool in Vygotsky's analysis was speech. Through the tool concept, Vygotsky established a direct succession between inter-mental and intra-mental operations. On this basis, he introduced his concept of higher mental functions. From this period comes one of his best-known statements:

Any higher mental function was external and social before it was internal.... We can formulate the general genetic law of cultural development in the following way: Any function in the child's

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<sup>1</sup> It is not my intention to establish a periodization of Vygotsky's work, but it is necessary to advance in the interpretation of Vygotsky's thought without approaching it as a monolithic corpus. That monolithic representation of Vygotsky's work has been based on Vygotsky's followers as enemies who have essentially centered on the second period of his work. In each moment of Vygotsky's work, a mix of ideas with different theoretical meanings emerged (González Rey, 2008).

cultural development appears twice or on two planes.... It appears first between people as an intermental category, and then within the child as an intramental category (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 197-198).

Vygotsky explained the transition from intermental to intra-mental, a specifically psychical field, through internalization, which still represents a very objectivistic approach to the comprehension of the psyche. This comprehension of that process does not lend a generative character to the mind as a system, recognizing it only as an internal expression of a formerly inter-mental process. Several Soviet psychologists also criticized the concept of internalization in different periods (Rubinstein, 1964; Ananiev, 1977; Orlov, 1990; Brushlinsky, 1977; Abuljanova, 1973).

One of the main principles assumed by Soviet psychology was the comprehension of the mental processes as a reflection of the real world, which was in fashion in Soviet Marxist philosophy at that time and was rigidly assumed as an attribute of any "Marxist" construction related to human psychological phenomena. It was utterly impregnated in the imaginations of psychologists, and this prevalence turned into one of the more important barriers for the development of the topic of subjectivity in psychology.

The relevance of reflection was central in the works of all of the founders of Soviet psychology. A.N. Leontiev wrote:

Introducing the concept of reflection into psychology as a basic concept laid the foundation for its development on a new Marxist-Leninist theoretical basis. Psychology has developed for 50 years since that time, and its concrete-scientific presentations have developed and changed; the main thing – the approach toward the psyche as a subjective image of objective reality – has remained and is unchangeable (Leontiev, 1978, p. 27).

The central place given to the principle of reflection led Leontiev to identify the psyche as an image. The image, taken as a reproduction of a given external object, could be considered as subjective only for its belonging to the subject, but, ontologically, it represents nothing new in relation to the object. Going forward on this question, Leontiev continued:

The Lenin theory of reflection considers sensory images in human consciousness as prints, photographs of an independently existing reality (Leontiev, 1978, p. 33).

Therefore, the full identity between the image and the object is affirmed since it is considered to be like a print.

Afterwards, in an attempt to overcome that mechanistic view of the psyche and of the reflection itself, on which the theory of activity developed, Leontiev stated:

But this [the prior reference related to the Lenin theory of reflection] forms only one side of the characterization of psychic reflection; the other side consists of the fact that psychic reflection, as distinct from mirror and other forms of passive reflection, is subjective, and this means that it is not passive, not dead, but active, that into its definition enters human life and practice, and that it is characterized by the movement of a constant flow, objective into subjective (Leontiev, 1978, p. 33).

That paradoxical style, in which an underlining statement is contradicted some pages later, was characteristic of Soviet authors investigating certain "hot" topics of a doctrinal character, as was the case of reflection in psychology. Leontiev flew in "a circle" over the same question. In doing so, he tried to reconcile the active character of reflection with the representation of its objective genesis, but he mistakenly reduced his comprehension of its objective genesis to a reproduction of an external given reality in a psychical result, taking the image as the most

plausible psychological phenomenon for illustrating that process. On this basis was developed the activity theory; a given external phenomenon, in this case an object, became the basis for the objective character of the psyche through its reproduction as an internal psychological process as a result of internalization. From that assumption, activity theory essentially led to inquiry into cognitive and sensorial processes on a positivistic experimental methodological basis.

That attempt to develop an objective psychology also impacted Rubinstein, who can be considered as the Soviet psychologist who dealt in the greatest depth with the theoretical challenges resulting from the relation between philosophy and psychology. On reflection, he wrote:

The Marxist theory of reflection is an application of the Dialectical materialist principle of reflection on the knowledge process, a principle that established, as was seen above, that external conditions act through internal ones. Every process is determined by external objective conditions and is refracted through the internal laws of the very process (Rubinstein, 1965, p. 59-60).

Rubinstein made a notorious effort to save the active character of reflection, long before Leontiev's attempt. The discussion continued in similar terms for more than thirty years; the original Rubinstein text quoted above dated from the 1940s. It provides evidence of the difficulties faced by Soviet psychologists in dealing with that topic. Despite Rubinstein's effort in the defense of the active character of reflection on the basis of the current internal psychological structure as a mediator from external influences, he could not overcome the one-sided representation of reflection as a process that takes place from external to internal. It is curious that Rubinstein grouped reflection with knowledge processes, not with psychological functions. That terminological difference could reflect Rubinstein's attempt to understand the genesis of other psychological

processes based on new principles. The idea of reflection as it was understood by Soviet psychologists, giving priority to objective, external given objects, reduced psychological processes to an internal, intrapsychical phenomenon. This position was very paradoxical considering Soviet psychologists' explicit intention to move forward with a cultural-historical definition of the psyche. Soviet psychology only explicitly revisited the topic of subjectivity and its generative character in the 1970s, when activity theory became a target of many critics.<sup>2</sup>

The fragility of that representation centered on the comprehension of reflection as the transition from external facts and operations to internal operations and processes; this transition contributed to maintaining the concept of "external influences", which could be considered as a remnant of a mechanistic determinism. Such a term indicated a contextual representation of reality that develops through concrete and fragmenting influences. This scheme unavoidably implied the preservation of a mechanical subject-object dichotomy within which the object is considered as primary and the subject as secondary, an effect of the object's influences. Such an approach was mechanical as opposed to dialectic. The social and historical realities within which persons grow up and interact should be understood as a network of ongoing facts and consequences unfolding into the subjective production of many people. Subjectivity is not an effect; it is a complex human production within which collateral effects, consequences, facts, and subjective configurations of the individuals and those social spaces within which they live combine into a recursive and complex subjective network.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about this point, consult "The Thesis and Speech of V Congress of the Society of Psychologists of the Soviet Union," Moscow, 1977, the central topic of discussion of which was "The problem of activity in soviet psychology".

The absence of a clear ontological position related to the human psyche in Soviet psychology led Vygotsky to identify the psyche with something different, in this case, with an intermental or external operation. In doing so, nothing qualitatively new was added to the external operation after becoming internal. The psyche, from this viewpoint, does not differ from action, whether operational or communicative: it is the system of internalized actions.

Vygotsky characterized himself as being in a permanent stream of thought. His last period was particularly rich and contradictory, but, unfortunately, he had no time to deeply develop his ideas from that period. He returned in that time to many of the topics developed during his first period. One new concept that he addressed was sense, which ephemerally appeared in some of his last works, bringing to light different alternatives for the development of questions that remained unanswered after his first writings.

## **The category of sense and its importance in Vygotsky's work**

In "Imagination and its development in childhood", one of the works of his last period written in 1932, Vygotsky began to represent imagination not as a function but as a system, taking an important step in the representation of the human psyche as a complex system. In this text Vygotsky wrote:

Thus, interconnected in this single knot, we find three of the greater problems of contemporary psychology, and of contemporary child psychology in particular: The problem of thinking, the problem of imagination and the problem of will (Vygotsky, 1987b, p. 349).

Will is closely interconnected with affective processes. In that lecture, Vygotsky took an important step in considering the close interrelations between the three mentioned processes.

However, he could go no further in the idea regarding the definition of a new qualitative unity of the psyche.

The concept of sense was promising because of its malleability, and the movement turned it into an interesting theoretical means for understanding the changeable and complex psychical production in such a way that it would be possible to make sense of subjective processes. Traditionally, psychological categories were based on concrete and invariable behavioral content considered inherent to certain individual psychical patterns. From this representation, it would be impossible to follow the process by which subjective individual configurations develop in humans. However, sense, as it was presented prior to Vygotsky by Bakhtin and Shpet, was oriented toward processes in relation and in movement. Sense had heuristic potential to become a new psychological synthesis between external and internal processes.

The above assumption was justified by Vygotsky's following remark:

A word's sense is the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word. Sense is a dynamic, fluid and complex formation which has several zones that vary in their stability. Meaning is only one of these zones of the sense that the word acquires in the context of speech (Vygotsky, 1987a, p. 275-276).

Vygotsky maintained the definition of sense associated with the word, as did Paulhan. Vygotsky's representation of sense as the "aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word" permitted him to integrate this category into a new psychical whole irreducible to a word. In doing so, for the first time he defined a category capable of integrating different psychological functions and processes in each person's concrete expression. Sense seemed to represent a psychological production involved in the flux of

language, not in a deterministic way, but as a psychological chain of events able to find new psychological values through the ongoing process of action. On the same page as the above quotation, he stated:

The word is an inexhaustible source of new problems. Its sense is never complete. Ultimately, the sense of the word depends on one's understanding of the word as a whole and on the internal structure of personality (Vygotsky, 1987a, p. 276).

By including personality in the definition of sense, Vygotsky renders it more psychological than Paulhan's definition. The consequences of that inclusion were very important because they allowed him to begin to understand sense as a psychological unity. Understanding sense as being influenced by personality, in fact, allowed him to integrate the 'word' into the domain of personality and personality into the domain of action. However, Vygotsky could go no further in a complete reformulation of his psychological categories on the basis of this concept, nor even make explicit its possible consequences for the reformulation of psychology. Sense remained unfinished and incomplete in his work, and I am not sure if Vygotsky himself clearly understood the potential of that concept for the development of psychology.

A new and decisive moment in Vygotsky's understanding of the affective-cognitive unity was expressed in his paper "On the question of the psychology of the creative artist", written in 1932. In that paper, also belonging to this final period of his work, he claimed:

In the process of societal life, feelings develop and prior systems of relations disintegrate (within which they exist as a result of the biological organization of psyche); the emotions come into new relationships with other elements of psychical life, a new system appears, new blendings of psychical functions; units of higher order emerge, governed by special laws, mutual dependencies,

and special forms of connection and motion (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 328).

It is not a coincidence that in this quotation he did not mention sense. In this quotation, the author supported the idea of the integration of different elements of psychical life around new relationships defined by emotions, but this time without any reference to words or to the world. This was an important moment because it represented again Vygotsky's recognition of the generative capacity of emotions, which he emphasized in his first period. His permanent reference to the topics of affection and cognition and his historical preoccupation with the systemic unity of the psyche, supported on the idea that the unity between cognitive and affective processes was central, left open an alternative for advancing into a new representation of the psyche as a complex system.

A.A. Leontiev attempting to define a new moment in Vygotsky's representation of psyche on the basis of sense said:

In connection with Vygotsky, we have become accustomed to speaking of a synthesis or unity of intellect and affect. But might it not be more correct to say-again in his terminology- that he was concerned with the relationship between intellect (thinking) and sense Vygotsky's principal thesis (summarizing the various formulations found in his different works) would then be this: There exists a complicated dynamic system of senses that includes a motivational (affective) side, as well as the will, the dynamic of action, and the dynamic of thinking. They can assume various relationships to one another and form diverse "networks". Intellect, like all higher psychical functions, is subordinated to this system. This, then, is the dynamic, self-developing human psyche in its true wholeness and social determinedness. If Vygotsky had lived only a few more years, he would surely have concentrated his effort on the analysis of this system (Leontiev, 1992, p. 43).

I agree wholeheartedly with A. A. Leontiev. The study of the consequences of the concept of sense could be essential for a new ontological definition of the human psyche. I would like to emphasize from the quotation Leontiev's idea that "intellect, like all higher psychical functions, is subordinated to this system". That complex dynamic system of senses appears as an inseparable moment of any living experience, turns into the alive, subjective side of that experience. This crucial, central idea only was mentioned in the Vygotsky's work referred above (1984); it does not appear in any other of his posterior works. Even when Leontiev in the prior commented quotation stated that "he (in reference to Vygotsky) was concerned with the relationship between intellect (thinking) and affect", he reduced the concept of sense to affection. In doing so, the author overlooked the idea of sense as unity of psyche, as it appeared in Vygotsky's references to sense. Contrary to Leontiev's statement, I consider that one of the consequences of sense could be the consideration of psychical functions as functions of sense, which could overcome the restriction involved in the definition of thinking strictly as a cognitive process. Once fantasy and imagination are inseparable of thinking we have something more complex than mere cognition.

However, those ideas that characterize the last period of Vygotsky's work were ignored by Kharkov's group, headed by A. N. Leontiev and integrated by Vygotsky's fellows, Luria, Zaporozhets, Bozhovich, Elkonin and Galperin, among others. A. A. Leontiev wrote:

There are many theoretical ideas in these works, however, that were not picked up by the Kharkov group or were only partially accepted. These were hardly noticed by Vygotsky's historiographers and were deliberately ignored by his critics. The more important of these ideas was that of "sense" or "sense field.... Only many years later did A. N. Leontiev speak publicly of "personal sense" (most clearly in his 1974 work, "Psychological

problem of the Consciousness of Learning"). There appears to be a gap between Leontiev's "personal sense" and Vygotsky's "sense field", but it is in fact not the case" (Leontiev, 1992, p. 41).

The concept of sense has remained mistreated up to now, in particular in the analysis of its consequences for the development of new trends in psychological thinking. In spite of Vygotsky explicitly never develop some consequences of the concept of sense, it is impossible to read in his short use of this concept, that sense since it "is the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word" as Vygotsky stated in a mentioned above quotation, it is possible to conclude that among that aggregate are also emotions. So sense represent a cognitive –affective unity configured on human action, because words as a permanent part of human expressions.

## **Relevance of the "social situation of development" and "perezhivanie" in understanding subjectivity from a cultural-historical optic**

After the Vygotsky's writings about sense, he, in one of his last conferences, entitled by Van der Veer & Valsiner (1994) as "The problem of the environment", introduced the concept of 'perezhivanie' (emotional experience) whose aim seems to be very near of that enunciated by Vygotsky when he referred to the dynamic systems of senses. On regarding 'perezhivanie' Vygotsky wrote in that conference:

The emotional experience [perezhivanie] arising from any situation or from any aspect of environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child. Therefore, it is not any of the factors in

themselves (if taken without reference to the child) which determines how they will influence the future course of his development, but the same factors refracted through the prism of the 'perezhivanie' (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 339-340).

Vygotsky did not use the concept of sense in his analysis on the influence that environment will have on the child, using instead 'perezhivanie' to explain a dynamic that could be explained through the concept of sense. Given Leontiev's assumption and my particular interpretation regarding that category, Vygotsky would likely have used sense for explaining how environment influences child development. In the mentioned conference Vygotsky attempted to transcend the mechanical relationship between external and internal, in an effort that newly reinforced the idea of mind as production and not as internalization.

The term 'refraction', used by him instead of the term reflection, has important implications for thinking of psyche not as an effect; this idea is crucial for the development of the topic of subjectivity from this approach. The term production, as I use it here, does not mean any transcendental or innate production, but a subjective one; its means the emergence of emotional states that are not understandable only from the objective circumstances that influences the person from the outside. The 'refraction' implies a recognition that the effect of any external event to the person's situation or process would depend on the individual's psychical organization and action in the ongoing process of a living experience.

The distance taken by Vygotsky from the objective determination of psyche was also explicitly defended by him in the next paragraph:

At the same time environment should not be regarded as a condition of development which purely objectively determines the development of a child by virtue of the fact that it contains certain qualities or features, but one should always

approach environment from the point of view of the relationship which exist between the child and its environment at a given stage of his development (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 338)

Social environment is not considered by him as a given, but as something organized in the course of human relationships. Social facts are not objective given 'entities' which influence development as objective influences; they will take on different emotional values for development as result of the person's actual psychical organization. Social facts become relevant for development by their transformations into emotional states, a process that takes place by their refraction through the person's psychical organization.

The ideas developed by Vygotsky in that conference, which is central to understanding the path of his thinking in that last moment of his life, were very similar to those discussed by him in several other lectures addressed to the students of medicine in the Moscow University in 1934.<sup>3</sup> In those conferences, according to Bozhovich (1981), Vygotsky sustained that the environment should not be studied as a given "social situation of development" which is determined by its own objective definition of the child's development. Taking another position in relation to the social character of human development, Vygotsky introduced the important concept of "social situation of development" that, according to Bozhovich (1981), was defined as the specific combination of the child's personal characteristic and those external condition under which the child's experience takes place.

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<sup>3</sup> That reference was taken from Bozhovich (1981), one of his disciples who latter integrated to the Kharkov's group from which she left due to her differences with A. N. Leontiev in relation to the definition of motive. According to her, those conferences dictated by him in 1934 were not published until 1968, year in which appeared the Russian original of the Bozhovich's work from which I took this information.

Vygotsky discussed the “social situation of development” through his definition of ‘perezhivanie’ as the psychological unity that appears as result of the relationship between situational and the personal characteristics of each person at each stage of development. In “Psychology of the Environment” he wrote:

“So, in a emotional experience [perezhivanie] we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, that are represented in ‘perezhivanie’ ” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342).

Every external event becomes psychological only as a result of that emotional experience [perezhivanie] that in turn resulted from its relevance to the current psychical child's structure. So ‘perezhivanie’ is singular and unpredictable; it is a truly psychical production.

Emphasizing the singular character of ‘perezhivanie’, Vygotsky stated:

It is therefore obvious, that if we have two people with two different types of constitutional characteristics, then one and the same event is likely to elicit a different emotional experience [perezhivanie] in each of them. Consequently, the constitutional characteristic of the person and generally the personal characteristics of children are, as it were, mobilized by a given emotional experience [perezhivanie], are laid down, become crystallized within a given emotional experience [perezhivanie] but, at the same time, this experience does not just represent the aggregate of the child's personal characteristics which determines how the child experienced this particular event emotionally, but different events also elicit different emotional experiences [perezhivanie] in the child (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342-343).

Vygotsky made an effort to understand ‘perezhivanie’ not as “encapsulated” in itself content that becomes the “cause” of the behavior, but as the production which takes place through

the ongoing course of development. As Vygotsky said above “different events elicit different ‘perezhivanie’ in the child”.

At this time in the evolution of his work, from the very dynamic and complex representation of psyche emerged a new definition of human mind as a subjective system configured through emotional states [perezhivanie]. However, similar to the relationship with the category of sense, Vygotsky could not consequently developed the concept of emotional moment ‘perezhivanie’. At the end in “Psychology of Environment” he wrote:

I think that you will agree with me when I say that any event or situation in a child's environment will have a different effect on him depending on how far the child understand this sense and meaning (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 343).

As Bozhovich wrote:

If the concept of ‘perezhivanie’ developed by him (is referred to Vygotsky) approached us to the interpretation to the real causes of child development, the later search for the link that defines development that concludes in the concept of generalization , led us back to intellectualist positions (Bozhovich, 1991, p. 125).

Following the trajectory of Vygotsky's thought it is possible to appreciate his efforts toward a comprehension of human psyche as a system in which emotions are as important as intellectual meanings and representations. Just through concepts like ‘perezhivanie’ and sense, Vygotsky attempted to define psychical unities able to reveal the indissoluble relationship between cognitive and affective processes. These concepts revealed his worries about the dominant deterministic position that prevailed at that time in Soviet psychology regarding the genesis of psyche based on reflection. The Vygotsky's enunciation of concepts like refraction, the generative and active character of emotions and

the singular character resulting from the impact of circumstances on psychical development, opened a new challenge for the comprehension of human psyche; human psyche appeared as a complex system impossible to be reduced to the assimilation of the facts and processes involved in its development. The premises for a new definition of subjectivity from a cultural – historical standpoint were established. Now it is necessary to take those premises advancing on the new challenges they opened for the next generations.

## Final remarks

Vygotsky's work should be understood as a system with several moments that contradicted one another at certain concrete moments, and it cannot be taken as a set of concrete principles from beginning to end. His concrete categories should be located within the system as a whole, avoiding the use of them separately, which could lead to the vulgarization of his theory.

- The first and last moments of Vygotsky's work have been misunderstood in their consequences for the development of psychology. The concepts of sense, 'perezhivanie' and "social situation of development" introduced by him in the last period of his career were coherent with his multiple attempts to define unities of psychical life, which is strong evidence of the importance that he placed on the comprehension of the psyche-like system.

- The concepts of sense and 'perezhivanie' represented an important turning point in Vygotsky's work. Based on those concepts, Vygotsky implicitly recognized the generative character of the human mind. This recognition is important to develop the concept of subjectivity based on new principles, overcoming the representation of the human psyche as a reflection that was long dominant in Soviet psychology.

- Sense and 'perezhivanie' appear not as "entities", but as unities organized on the ongoing subject's experience; both concepts underline the

relevance of emotions in the understanding of human mind. This relevance given to emotions implies a recognition of human states as truly subjective productions. They do not result from mere the assimilation of external influences.

- Vygotsky work opened a path to advance on the topic of subjectivity as a continuous production of symbolic – emotional configurations, which would result from the complex alternatives generated in the interwoven movement between dominant at the beginning of any system of action or relationships subjective configurations, and those new configurations appearing on the ongoing process of development. The concepts and processes of this complex order should be elaborated.

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